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ABSTRACT

The efficacy of a contextualist training model for increasing the peer acceptance of learning-disabled students through skills training and systematic opportunities for interactions with peers and teachers is evaluated. Ten peer-rejected learning-disabled subjects (seven males and three females) in grades 3 to 6 were selected to participate in the 20-week intervention. The model emphasizes teaching rejected students specific skills and strategies unknown to classmates, pairing these rejected students with high accepted non-learning-disabled peers for special training sessions, and providing opportunities for students to demonstrate and teach their new skills to others. In addition to teaching social skills, opportunities for peers and teachers to perceive the target students as desirable members of the classroom are systematically provided. Significant increases in positive nominations occurred for males following the intervention. Changes in social status classification occurred for five of the 10 subjects. Subject interviews revealed that target students' perceptions of being liked by their classmates also increased, although not significantly. Learning-disabled males were more likely to demonstrate increases in peer acceptance than females. (JDD)

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Peer Rejection Intervention 1

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Peer Rejection is a Stubborn Thing:
Increasing Peer Acceptance of Rejected
Students with Learning Disabilities

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Running Head: Peer Rejection Intervention

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Peer Rejection Intervention 2

Abstract

The efficacy of a contextualist training model for increasing the peer acceptance of learning disabled students through skills training and systematic opportunities for interactions with peers and teachers is evaluated. Ten peer rejected LD subjects, 7 male and 3 female, were selected to participate in the 20 week intervention. Results indicate that significant increases in positive nominations occurred for males between pre, post, and follow-up testing. The components of the model are presented as well as results of subject interviews and reciprocal nominations. Discussion focuses on the characteristics of students likely to increase peer acceptance with this model as well as suggestions for increasing the model's effectiveness for future intervention research.

Peer Rejection Intervention 3

Peer rejection is a stubborn thing: Increasing peer acceptance of rejected students with learning disabilities.

Learning disabled students are more at risk for negative peer relationships and low teacher acceptance than are their nonlearning disabled peers (see for review Pearl, Donahue, & Bryan, 1986; Vaughn & LaGreca, 1988). Since peer rejection is relatively stable and is associated with such negative outcomes as dropping out of school and later adjustment difficulties (e.g. Parker & Asher, 1987; Howes, 1988), learning disabled students have been the target of several studies examining the efficacy of social skills interventions on increasing their peer acceptance.

A review of social skills intervention studies with learning disabled students (Vaughn, McIntosh, & Zaragoza, in press) yielded unconvincing results on the impact of social skills interventions with LD students. Sixteen studies examining the effects of social skills interventions with learning disabled students were located. Nine of these studies indicated few or no significant intervention effects. With the exception of one case study (Vaughn, Lancelotta, & Minnis, 1988), when peer sociometric ratings were administered there were no significant increases in peer acceptance for the targeted LD population. Even when increases in appropriate social behaviors for target LD students were observed (Northcutt, 1987; Williams, 1983), teachers and peers did not perceive the positive change and behaviors did not generalize to other settings (Berler, Gross, & Drabner, 1982).

Peer Rejection Intervention 4

This discouraging finding that the target child's social behavior may improve without yielding increases in peer acceptance has been observed with rejected nonlearning disabled students as well (e.g. Bierman & Furman, 1984).

Another issue which has been problematic in social skills interventions with LD students has been appropriate subject selection. In most of the social skills interventions with learning disabled students, criteria for subject selection has focused on the student being learning disabled rather than socially rejected. Since many students with learning disabilities are average or high accepted by their peers it is likely that many social skills interventions have focused on children who do not need intervention. Future studies need to identify learning disabled students who are rejected by their peers as target subjects for social interventions.

Social skills intervention models with learning disabled students have been primarily deficit based (Hymel, 1986). Deficit based models assume that the low peer and teacher acceptance of students with learning disabilities is a function of the child's skill deficits in learning and social cognition. Support for a deficit based model can be derived from research which suggests that the low peer acceptance, social skills difficulties, and attention problems of students with learning disabilities occur prior to their identification as LD (Vaughn & Hogan, in press) and are related to their learning disabilities (see for review, Wiener, 1987). A competing hypothesis for the

Peer Rejection Intervention 5

low peer acceptance of learning disabled students can be derived from a contextualist model. This model assumes that the low social status of learning disabled students is a function of the interaction between the child and the system (Forman, 1987). Several factors explain the social development and peer relations of learning disabled students within a contextualist model. These include social and cultural factors, interactions between the child and others, and the extent to which the child is perceived as a valuable contributor to the system. The critical difference between a deficit model and a contextualist model is the location of the perceived problem. The deficit model perceives the child as having the problem, thus interventions are child centered focusing on increasing skills. In contrast, a contextualist model perceives the problem as a function of both the child and the system, thus increasing the child's skill level is insufficient without systemic change.

Since skill deficit models for social skills interventions with learning disabled students have been unsuccessful in altering the peer acceptance and social status of learning disabled students, a social skills intervention based on a contextualist model for increasing peer acceptance of LD students was developed (Vaughn, Lancelotta, & Minnis, 1988; Vaughn & McIntosh, in press). A contextualist model seems particularly suited to social interventions with LD students because the low acceptance of LD students is likely explained by a number of factors in addition to the skill deficits of the child, e.g.

Peer Rejection Intervention 6

teacher perceptions, less time spent in the regular classroom.

The intervention program in this study was designed to increase the peer acceptance of learning disabled students through skills training and systematic opportunities for peers and teachers to perceive the target students as valuable members of the classroom and school. This model emphasizes teaching rejected LD students specific skills and strategies unknown to classmates, pairing these rejected students with high accepted nonlearning disabled peers for special training sessions, and providing opportunities for students to demonstrate and teach their new skills to others (Vaughn & McIntosh, in press). In addition to teaching social skills, opportunities for peers and teachers to perceive the target students as desirable members of the classroom are systematically provided. This intervention program was successful in raising the peer ratings and social status of a rejected, learning disabled female (Vaughn, Lancelotta, & Minnis, 1988). The purpose of this study is to replicate the intervention with a larger sample of rejected learning disabled students.

Method

Subjects

Ten learning disabled students, in grades 3 through 6, were selected to participate in this study. Criteria for inclusion were established as: identified as learning disabled prior to this academic school year, mainstreamed into regular education classes for at least fifty percent of the school day, and

Peer Rejection Intervention 7

classified through regular classroom peer sociometric nominations as rejected (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Seven males and three females met this criteria from a group of 43 LD students in an urban school containing 419 students in grades 3 through 6. The ethnicity of the ten students included 3 Blacks, 2 Whites, 4 Hispanics, and 1 Middle Eastern. This distribution is representative of the ethnic distribution of the school district.

Ages ranged from 9 years, 1 month to 12 years, 10 months with a mean age of 11 years, 1 month. Full scale WISC-R IQ scores ranged from 84 to 112, with a mean IQ of 97. Hours attending the resource LD classroom per week ranged from 10 to 15 hours, with a mean attendance time of 12.9 hours. Measures of academic achievement from the Stanford Achievement Test (Gardner, Rudman, Karlsen, & Merwin, 1982, 1983, 1984) given in the Spring of the intervention indicated stanine scores: reading ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.95$), math computation ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.70$), and math application ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.50$).

Measures

All students in grades three through six ($n = 419$) were administered the classroom peer ratings and nominations for two purposes: (a) to identify LD students who were rejected by their peers and NLD classmates who were popular, and (b) to measure intervention effects. Ten rejected LD students were identified for intervention and were administered subject interviews.

Classroom peer ratings and nominations. A peer rating of acceptance (Roistacher, 1974) and a peer friendship nomination

Peer Rejection Intervention 8

was administered to all students grades three through six. Peer nominations were used for sample selection identifying rejected LD students, and also as a dependent measure at post intervention and follow up. Peer ratings and nominations were administered to all students to further emphasize that the project was a school based intervention and to identify popular classmates to pair with rejected, LD subjects..

The peer rating of acceptance, a valid and reliable index of peer relations for elementary school children (Asher & Hymel, 1981) is a group administered measure. Children are given a sheet of paper with the names of all of their same sex classmates printed on the left side and the numbers 1 through 5 next to each classmate's name. Same-sex ratings are used because they provide a more valid assessment of social status in elementary school children than cross-sex ratings (Burkowski & Newcomb, 1984; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Students are instructed to circle a number for each classmate that describes how much they like that classmate: 1) not at all, 2) not much, 3) so-so, 4) pretty much, and 5) very much. A question mark selection was available to students who felt they did not know a particular classmate at all. This type of measure allowed for the evaluation of each member of the class by all other same-sex members.

A measure of social status (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982) was obtained by asking classmates to list their three best friends. These positive nominations were standardized, yielding a positive nomination Z score for each child that could be

Peer Rejection Intervention 9

compared across classrooms. Negative nominations were obtained by counting the number of dislike ratings (Asher & Dodge, 1986). Dislike ratings were also converted to standardized Z scores. Based on their social impact and social preference scores, students were classified as Popular, Average, Controversial, Neglected, and Rejected (Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli, 1982).

Subject Interviews. At pre, post, and follow up testing, subjects were interviewed and asked to give responses to the following questions: 1) On a 1 to 5 scale, how much do you feel others in the classroom like you?, 2) If someone in your classroom asked you what they could do to make friends, what would you tell them?, 3) If I asked another boy/girl (same sex) in the class what kind of a friend you were, what would they say?, and 4) If you asked to play with a group of children your same age and they said "No", what would you do next? These questions were selected to reflect self-report changes that may not have been indicated in the peer measures.

Intervention

The intervention period consisted of 20 weeks with 2 to 3 thirty minute sessions per week. During the first 4 weeks of the intervention, the targeted rejected LD students and their matched high accepted peers met outside of the regular classroom with graduate students from the university in small groups of two to four students. The purpose of these training sessions was to learn and practice the skills and strategies related to making friends and solving interpersonal problems and to rehearse

teaching the skills and strategies to their entire class. For the remainder of the 20 week intervention period subjects continued to practice the intervention strategies outside of the regular classroom with the remainder of the intervention sessions spent in the regular classroom. The intervention consisted of three key components: skills training, informant status, and interactions with significant others (Vaughn & McIntosh, in press).

The first component of the intervention taught target students an interpersonal problem solving strategy plus skills and techniques to work in groups and to lead group activities. Skills training followed a cognitive-behavioral approach including cooperative goal setting, modeling, role-playing, rehearsal and practice in natural settings. Target students were taught to develop questioning and monitoring skills, generate a range of solutions, select the best plan to solve the problem, implement the plan, evaluate the outcome, and select another plan in the event that the first plan did not solve the problem.

A second component of the intervention, informant status, focused on providing opportunities for target students to be perceived by their classmates as having information their classmates considered valuable. First, all classes were told that through a lottery small groups of students had been selected to receive specialized instruction in problem solving and friendship training. Second, these selected students would serve as the social skills trainers for their class and school and

Peer Rejection Intervention 11

would provide a problem solving service. This select group would teach their class the strategies learned in private sessions they attended with university graduate students. Target students, including rejected LD students and their high status peers were then identified as social skills trainers.

A problem solving box was placed in the classroom. Classes were encouraged to write any problems they had with peers on a slip of paper and to insert the slip into the problem solving box. Classes were told that at least once each week, the social skills trainers from their class would consider the problems and present ideas and alternatives to help solve the problems. During intervention sessions, the target students met to review and work on class presentations and lessons based on problems from the problem solving box. After presentations were developed, social skills trainers met with their class to present problems selected from the box, teach social skills, and present solutions and alternatives to the selected problems.

The third component focused on interactions between target students and high accepted classmates as well as recognition by parents and school personnel. Situations were arranged so target students were seen by their classmates as significant members of their class and school. A key method used was peer pairing. The social skills trainers were chosen such that training pairs consisted of a targeted rejected LD student and a high accepted NLD classmate. Throughout the intervention, the social skills trainers were given recognition for their work. Articles were

Peer Rejection Intervention 12

written about the program in the student school newspaper and in the Parents' and Teachers' newsletter. The program was periodically mentioned during school announcements and daily bulletins. Pictures and videotapes were taken during the group presentations and were shown back to the class. At year's end, the principal presented a certificate awarding each of the trainers the title of "Official Social Skills Trainer."

Results

Peer Ratings and Nominations

Pretest ratings for the target low accepted LD subjects generated a mean of 3.05 with a standard deviation of .39 on the 1 to 5 Likert Scale. Post ratings generated a mean of 3.07 with a standard deviation of .45, and follow up ratings generated a mean of 3.06 with a standard deviation of .81. A oneway layout repeated measures analysis of variance was performed across the three ratings periods and indicated no significant differences.

Repeated measures analysis of variance using a oneway layout was performed on positive and negative nomination standard scores across the pre, post and follow up periods. No significant differences were found for negative nomination scores, however differences for positive nomination standardized scores approached significance (2, 18, $F = 3.34$, $p = .058$). When female subjects were dropped from the analysis, results were significant over time (2, 12, $F = 5.578$, $p = .02$). A Tukey's HSD post hoc test was performed at the .05 level and determined that significant differences occurred for males between the pretest

Peer Rejection Intervention 13

measure and the post and follow up measures. Means and standard deviations over time for positive and negative nomination Z scores are reported in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

The second method of interpreting the nomination data was to observe the status classification of the subjects (Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli 1982). Table 2 shows the changes in social status classification during the intervention and follow up measures. Changes in social status classification occurred for five of the 10 subjects at the post intervention measure. At the follow up measure, three subjects had retained the classification with one subject receiving an average classification who had previously received a rejected status throughout the intervention measures. These results, while not overwhelmingly positive, must be viewed in light of the stability of the rejection status (for review see Parker & Asher, 1987; Wiener, 1987).

Insert Table 2 about here.

Subject Interviews

Table 3 shows responses to questions 2, 3, and 4 of the interview questions asked of each subject at pre, post, and follow up periods. To question 1: How much do you feel others (same sex) in the classroom like you, on a scale from 1 to 5, no

Peer Rejection Intervention 14

significant differences were found between response periods in a repeated measures ANOVA. Subjects responded with a mean like score of 3.5 at the pre intervention, 4.3 at post intervention, and 3.8 at six month follow up. Pre, post, and follow up interview questions are presented in Table 3. Percentages reflect more than one response to each question by the subjects.

Insert Table 3 about here.

Discussion

Children who are rejected by their peers are at considerable risk for later problems including dropping out of school, adjustment difficulties, and loneliness. Unfortunately, rejection status, even obtained as early as the primary grades, is stable across the lifespan. Unfortunately, intervention programs designed to alter the rejection status of children, for the most part, have not been very successful.

This study, based on a contextualist model, sought to increase the peer acceptance of rejected learning disabled students. While the results are not overwhelmingly positive, particularly for females, they demonstrate that rejection status is alterable. Peer rejection is a "stubborn thing" and even with system involvement, e.g. teachers, principal, and classmates, peer rejection resists change. Given the heretofore resistance to change of peer rejection status, the finding that five of the ten students' social status was altered and there were

significant increases in peer acceptance for males at post test and follow-up is encouraging.

Howes (1988) has reported in a longitudinal study the value of reciprocal friendship nominations in reducing the overall negative effects of rejection status. The reciprocal friendship nomination patterns of the target LD students were examined and revealed that at pretest four of the ten students received reciprocal nominations. At posttest six of the ten students received reciprocal nominations and at followup five students received reciprocal nominations. Four of the ten students did not receive reciprocal nominations at any of the three test points. This indicates that these four students are particularly at risk for adjustment difficulties.

This study indicates that learning disabled males who are rejected are more likely to demonstrate increases in peer acceptance than LD females. Since there were only three females in the study, further information with a larger cohort of females is needed, particularly in light of the success of this intervention with a female, LD student in a case study design (Vaughn, Lancelotta, & Minnis, 1988). Studies are needed which identify the characteristics of students most amenable to change in rejection status. It is likely that such factors as physical appearance, athletic ability, and attention problems influence the success of social skills interventions.

Subject interviews revealed that target students' perceptions of being liked by their classmates increased from

Peer Rejection Intervention 16

pretest to posttest although not significantly. In response to the question about "what kind of friend you are," target subjects' response of "good" decreased substantially over time from 70% at pretest to 27% at followup. Subjects' response "some say good/some say bad" increased from 0% at pretest to 36% at followup. These responses may be positively interpreted to suggest a more accurate self-appraisal by the LD students from pretest to followup. It is unlikely that classmates feel the LD rejected students make "nice" or "good" friends as 90% of the rejected LD target group self-assessed at pretest. The increase to 36% for the LD students claiming "some say good/some say bad" may indicate their self-appraisals are more in line with peer appraisals. Previous research (Vaughn & Hogan, in press) suggests that learning disabled students prior to identification have distorted self-perceptions about their social acceptance with their self perceptions being significantly high in light of low peer ratings of acceptance. Perhaps the intervention sessions provided opportunities for the rejected LD students to more accurately appraise how they are perceived by their classmates.

Given the negative outcomes associated with rejection status, interventions designed to increase the peer acceptance of rejected students are needed. These interventions are likely to be successful if they are both long term and involve significant others such as peers, teachers, and parents. This intervention attempted to alter the rejection status of students by focusing

Peer Rejection Intervention 17

the intervention in a school setting. Perhaps parent involvement and a longer intervention period would increase the power of the intervention. While the results of this study are encouraging, particularly given that positive changes with males were maintained in the following school year with new teachers and classmates (followup), further investigations are needed to refine and define the potent components of successful social interventions.

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Peer Rejection Intervention 21

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Standardized Positive and Negative Nominations Over Time

	<u>Positive Nominations</u>		<u>Negative Nominations</u>	
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
Pretest				
Male	-1.09	.62	1.02	.64
Female	-.87	.51	.96	.92
Total	-1.02	.59	1.00	.75
Posttest				
Male	-.61	.49	.59	.93
Female	-.56	.73	1.33	.95
Total	-.59	.58	.82	1.01
Follow Up				
Male	-.45	.67	.73	.91
Female	-.87	.05	1.33	1.27
Total	-.57	.59	.91	1.08

Table 2

Changes in Social Status Classification

Subject gender	Pretest	Posttest	Followup
(F)	rejected	average	average
(F)	rejected	rejected	rejected
(F)	rejected	rejected	rejected
(M)	rejected	average	rejected
(M)	rejected	rejected	rejected
(M)	rejected	rejected	average
(M)	rejected	controversial	controversial
(M)	rejected	average	rejected
(M)	rejected	rejected	rejected
(M)	rejected	average	average

Table 3

Students Interview Responses Over Time

If someone in your classroom asked you what they could do to make friends, what would you tell them?

	Pre	Post	Follow Up
Responses			
1) Talk to them/ask questions	50%	29%	50%
2) Be nice	19%	6%	17%
3) Ask them to play/Invite home or to dinner	19%	24%	17%
4) Help them/Lend	6%	18%	0%
5) Share	0%	12%	0%
6) Other (read to them, act like them, sit and tell them jokes)	6%	12%	17%

If I asked another boy/girl in the class what kind of a friend you were, what would they say?

	Pre	Post	Follow Up
Responses			
1) Nice	20%	30%	27%
2) Good	70%	40%	27%
3) Not a good friend/Mean	10%	0%	0%
4) Some say good/Some say bad	0%	20%	36%
5) Other (strong)	0%	10%	18%

Peer Rejection Intervention 24

If you asked to play with a group of children your same age and they said "No", what would you do next?

	Pre	Post	Follow Up
Responses			
1) Leave and play with others	69%	45%	58%
2) Keep trying	8%	9%	0%
3) Play alone	15%	45%	8%
4) Other (get mad, start a fight, ask why)	8%	0%	33%
